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ABSTRACT

Karen Horney's critique of Freud's theory of female development suggests that much theory and research in psychology is androcentric, and calls for the elimination of biases. This point is questioned, and the posit that scientific knowledge does not answer the question of what makes a person either female or male is explored. Biological, psychological, and sociological differences overlap genders, and the inconsistencies are discussed. The biological attempts at differentiation of sex are unsuccessful, whether through hormones, chromosomes, sexual organs, or whatever. The constancy of gender identity is evident in the discussion of transexualism. The example of biological attribution of gender is considered, while the "ultimate" criteria remains elusive. Gender, in all of its manifestations, including the physical, must be seen as a social construction. (LS)

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Biological and Commonsense Constructions of Gender

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In 1926, Karen Horney published a paper in which she demonstrated that Freud's theory of female development was grounded in the naive, common sense assumptions which little boys make about the world, rather than being grounded in objective scientific reality. (Horney, 1967). In light of contemporary approaches to the scientific understanding of gender, there are two comments we can make about Horney's critique. The first is that there is enough empirical evidence to support Horney, in that we know that much theory and research in psychology is androcentric (e.g. McKenna and Kessler, 1977). Secondly, the solution to this is said to be the elimination of biases, so that our objectivity as scientists is not compromised and so that we can continue to increase our understanding of what being female or male really means. For the past several years Suzanne Kessler and I have been developing a theoretical framework for viewing gender which challenges the possibility of ever achieving such a solution. (Kessler and McKenna, 1978). Our position can be summarized as follows: Scientific knowledge does not inform the answer to the question: What makes a person either a female or a male, a woman or a man? Rather, scientific knowledge justifies, appears to give grounds for, and reflexively demonstrates the already existing knowledge that a person is either female or male. Biological, psychological and sociological differences do not lead to two non-overlapping categories of people. Rather, the socially shared, common sense, methodical construction of a world of two and only two genders leads to the discovery of biological, psychological,

and sociological differences.

Giving all of our grounds for making this statement or developing all of its implications is beyond the time limits I have today. The statement is grounded in ethnomethodology (c.f.,Garfinkel 1967; Mehan and Wood, 1975) an approach to understanding scientific and everyday activity with which too few psychologists are familiar. Ethnomethodology asserts that all of us hold certain beliefs or incorrigible propositions about the nature of reality. These incorrigible propositions reflexively inform the meaning of events in the world and, at the same time, are "proved" by these events. All experience is taken as proof of the truth of incorrigible propositions. For example, one incorrigible proposition in arithmetic is that 2 + 2 = 4. If I add 2 + 2 and get 5 the incorrigible proposition informs me that my answer is wrong, and, at the same time, my seeing that the answer is wrong reflexively "proves" the truth of 2 + 2 = 4.

The most basic incorrigible proposition that most of us hold, both as scientists and as everyday actors, is that objects in the world have an existence independent of us, and an identity which remains constant. This incorrigible proposition holds true for gender also. There are two genders, each individual is a mere example of one of them, and the task of the scientist is to describe, as completely as possible, the constant characteristics which define male and female. Other ways of seeing the world are seen as "incorrect", "primitive", "biased", and so on. Ethnomethodology

asserts, however, that all realities are created in the same way -- through methodical (orderly, systematic, and thus recoverable) interactional work which creates and sustains whatever reality one is living, be it everyday life, science, or the reality of ethnomethodology.

Ethnomethodology comes to this conclusion by treating the constancy and independent reality of social categories like gender as beliefs and then temporarily suspending belief in these incorrigible propositions. What remains then are only particular concrete social interactions. From this perspective we can then assert that somehow, in each situation, a sense of "objective" facts which transcend the situation is produced and we can ask about the methodical ways that members of the group do this.

Asking what it means to be female or male, a woman or a man, is another way of asking how, in everyday life, gender is attributed; that is, how every person is placed into one of two mutually exclusive categories - male or female. Even anamolies like hermaphrodites are treated as either males or females who may have some of the characteristics of the other gender. However gender attribution occurs, the gender attribution process in everyday life forms the basis for all scientific work on gender. Before a researcher can ask any question about the behavior, biology, etc. of women and/or men, the researcher must already know what women and men are and how to tell them apart.

In our culture, biological criteria are seen as the most basic and primary defining features of gender. This primacy is another incorrigible proposition about gender. Any "signs" of gender in everyday life only receive their meaning through their connection to more basic assumptions about what female and male is in the first place. Biologists' criteria for defining gender, like chromosomes and hormones, are very different from those used in everyday life. However, biological criteria too are grounded in the everyday gender attribution process. An interesting analogy, regarding another dichotomy, is provided by a demonstration performed by a physician who hooked a blob of jello to an EEG machine in a hospital ward (Rensberger, 1976). The readings, he said, could have been interpreted as showing signs of life. The demonstration is not interpreted as proving that jello is alive. Rather, through beliefs about what objects a life attribution can be made to, the results are seen as demonstrating that EEG's may not be the best criteria for deciding whether someone is alive or not. When biologists discover that some biological criterion does not always differentiate males and females (the presence of estrogen, let's say, to take a historical example), they do not conclude there are no males and females; they continue their search for a "better" criterion. Although it seems that biological facts have an existence independent of gender labels (There are XY chromosomes, etc. and all these together are labeled "male"), the process, seen through the ethnomethodological

approach, is the reverse. Concepts of gender in everyday life lead to the "discovery" of "differentiating facts". The person who is interested in sex differences in the brain does not ask for XX and XY brains to study. She/he gets men and women as subjects by attributing gender to them in the same way as everyone else, and then, after they are classified into these two groups, differences are looked for.

If we socially define a person's gender as that which is attributed to them, then most biological criteria are irrelevant. There is no biological criterion which is necessary or sufficient for being a woman or a man in everyday life. Biological criteria are abstractions, not members' methods. All human beings, regardless of how much they know about biology, attribute gender.

The role that biology plays in gender attribution is to provide "signs", signs which serve as good reasons for our attributions. By saying "I know he is a man because he has a penis" we are demonstrating that we know what a man "really" is. If a child says "I know he is a man because he has short hair" or a Plains Indian said "I know he is a man because he goes to war", we do not know anything about how they made these classifications. We only know, as with "penis", what the social construction of gender is grounded in for them. In our culture, biological facts give grounds for, and support, the facticity of two genders. At the same time, biology itself is grounded in, and gets its support from, the basic

assumption that there are two, and only two, genders.

I have, until this point, been concentrating on two of the beliefs about gender held in the natural attitude and how these help determine scientific findings. The first is that there are only two genders and each person must be categorized. The second is that gender is grounded in biology. There is a third which I want to discuss briefly. That is the incorrigible proposition that gender is invariant. A person's gender never changes. The existence of transexuals seems to refute this incorrigible proposition. Indeed, much of people's refusal to accept transexualism stems from the belief in gender invariance. However, the medical profession, and transexuals themselves, by inventing and developing the concept of gender identity and its fixedness sometime between the age of 18 months and 4 years, have insured that a person's gender never changes. The transexual's body might change but her or his gender identity has always been stable.

Earlier, I mentioned that biological criteria for defining female and male are abstractions, not members' everyday methods. For example, although reproductive functioning is critical to biological concepts of gender, when we make a gender attribution we know nothing about a person's gonads. We assume, if we attribute female, that the person has ovaries, but if we learn that she does not, this does not change our gender attribution. I want to conclude,

however, by describing the one everyday situation where an abstract biological criterion has become the criterion used by non-scientists, because this situation underscores the reflexive relationship between our incorrigible propositions about gender and the use and development of biological "facts". In athletic competitions, particularly international games, the criteria for gender attribution are the biologists' -- an individual with a Y chromosome may not play in the women's games. Reviewing the history of gender attribution in sports illuminates how gender dichotomies are constructed and how important it is in modern society that the dichotomy not be challenged and that it be supported by scientific facts.

Since the inception of the modern Olympics, there has been little concern with discovering whether male participants are "real" males. The reason given is that "there is little or no advantage (for women to compete as men)" (Hanley, Note 1), since the superior strength of men makes them generally better than women in many athletic activities. In fact, there are no recorded cases of male competitors who were later "unmasked" as having been women.

The presumed superior strength and ability of men would, however, give them an unfair advantage over women, were they to compete in women's games. It is not important if this assertion is supported by actual gender differences, nor if it is, whether the reasons for the differences in athletic ability are biological or environ-

mental. Given the acceptance of differences as a "fact", once women began to compete in the modern Olympics and other international competitions, the question of making "correct" gender attributions was raised, especially after it became known that some "female" athletes had turned out to be men.

How, then, could the governing committees of the competitions insure that the women were really women? Clearly, given past experience, everyday gender attribution processes were not enough. It would be too easy for a competitor to "pass". Thus, prior to 1968 each country was required to provide certification of the genuineness of their female athletes' genders. Charges were made, though, that some of these certificates were fraudulent, and that some competing countries were not being truthful, or objective, in their certification procedures.

The result was that, beginning in 1968, a physical examination was required of each female athlete, which was carried out be an international, unbiased medical team at the site of the competition. Although some "women" withdrew from competition before the examination, this "test", too, was eventually challenged. It was alleged that physical characteristics were not enough evidence on which to make an absolutely certain attribution. It may have been felt that the availability of surgical and hormonal procedures to make a "male" body look like a "female" one, invalidated a physical examination.

At this point, the emphasis seems to have turned from insuring that there was no unfair competition to finding an unfailingly dichotomous definition of "female". The most clearly dichotomous criterion for attributing gender is the biologists' criterion of gender chromosomes. Therefore, in 1972, the "sex chromosome" test for determining if an athlete is "really" a woman was instituted.

The lining of the cheek is scraped, and the cells are stained and examined for Barr bodies. If there are less than 10% Barr bodies, then karyotyping is done to determine the exact gender chromosome makeup. The criterion is dichotomous-- any Y chromosomes and the person is declared not female and ineligible to compete in the women's games. (The person is not declared to be a male. What would happen if an individual, after "failing" the test, insisted on entering the men's competition, even if she had breasts and a vagina?).

As more is discovered about genetics, and new techniques are developed for examining the structure of chromosomes, it is likely that chromosomes will be "discovered" to be less dichotomous than they are now thought to be (Stoller, 1974). As a result, "more exact" criteria will be "discovered" for attributing chromosomal gender. The "ultimate" criteria for determing gender will continue to change as the scientists' facts change. Nevertheless, it is doubtful that the incorrigible proposition that there are two genders will change, and this, in itself, will help determine what

the "facts", for scientists as well as athletes, will be.

As long as the categories "female" and "male" present themselves to people in everyday life as external, objective, dichotomous physical facts, there will be scientific and common-sense searches for differences and differences will be found. Where there are dichotomies it is difficult to avoid evaluating one category in relation to the other. Unless and until gender, in all of its manifestations, including the physical, is seen as a social construction, action which will radically change our incorrigible propositions cannot occur.

No member, including myself, is exempt from the social construction of gender and the gender attribution process. In some realities, men and women are the way they are because that is the way the gods made them. In western science and everyday life, they are the way they are because of biology. From our perspective they are the way they are because of th social construction of gender. None of these realities is closer to the absolute truth than any other. What is different among different ways of seeing the world are the possibilities stemming from basic assumptions about the way the world is. What must be taken for granted, and what need not be, changes, depending on the incorrigible propositions one holds. The questions one asks, and how they should be answered also differ. It has become clear to us that within the paradigm of contemporary scientific approaches to gender we cannot know all that eventually can be uncovered about what it means to be a woman or a man.

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